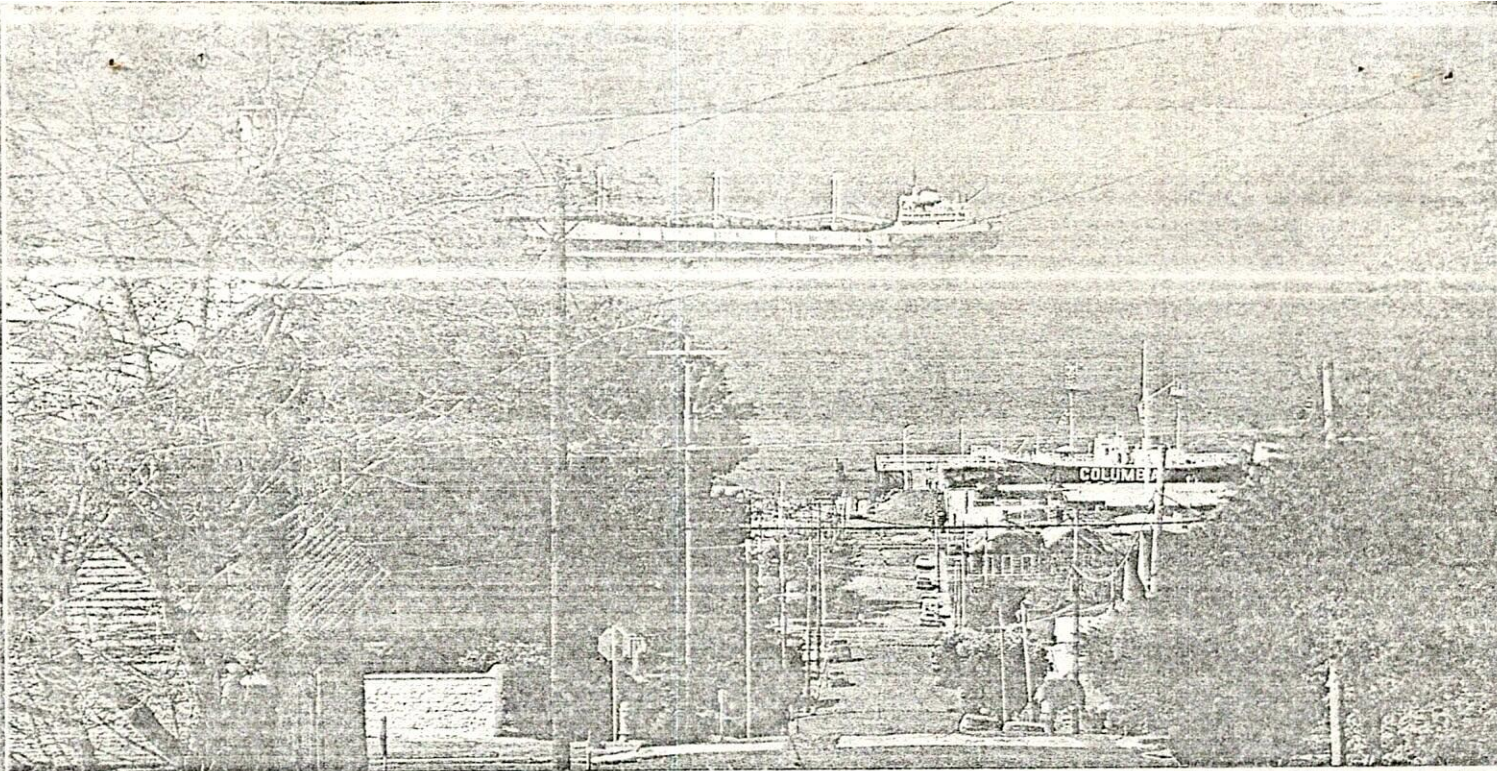




Looking down Astoria, OR's 16th Street, one can see the retired lightship Columbia, the broad estuary of the river and the hills of Washington state in the distance. Astoria is built up the side of a precipitous hill.

Astoria

An Unpretentious Port-of-Call

By Paul Haist

Weather hazards occasionally occur. Storms may sink or wreck ships. Even in fair weather, wind and wave may combine to produce a type of breaker known as the "widow-maker" and swamp a boat...

The climate is generally healthful...

Astoria, OR, may not seem a "healthful" port of call to the mariner confronted with the prospect of the legendary "widow-maker" of the Columbia River bar. The *United States Coast Pilot* is right to warn sailors of the hazards which attend the crossing of the Columbia bar.

However, in their cautionary zeal, the editors of the *Pilot* fail to point out that nearly all boats, large and small, navigate the Columbia bar successfully. Like the occasional air crash, the infrequent sinking on the bar is the news that makes the papers.

It would be a shame for mariners to be daunted by the reputation of this place where the Northwest's great river

meets the mighty Pacific Ocean. They would also miss seeing the oldest American community west of the Rocky Mountains.

Astoria is a no-nonsense port-of-call. The Finns and other Scandinavians, who form the ethnic backbone of Astoria, and the others who live here are characterized by their sense of practical austerity, which eschews the tinsel and glitter of communities which rely heavily on the tourist dollar.

The town remains an outpost on the nation's coastal frontier, whose inhabitants have not turned their backs on their traditional links to the river and the sea despite changing economic fortunes. Today, Astoria looks much the same as

it did not long after the turn of the century — perhaps just a little more worn.

Astoria is a survivor. Since its founding as a fur trading outpost in 1811 by John Jacob Astor, the town and its people have been possessed of the vitality and quiet pride that is found among those who take adversity in stride.

Astoria also is possessed of an innate charm and a stark beauty unlike that found in communities where atmosphere is contrived as a commercial tool. Quite simply, Astoria is an unpretentious small seaport and a place where yachting takes a back seat to the working waterfront.

Yet, Astoria has much to offer the visiting skipper.

Inside the bar, the Columbia's broad estuary generally offers exciting sailing. Very brisk nor'westers dominate during the period of best weather from late May through September.

But because this is a hardworking port, tugs and pilot vessels cruise here more frequently than pleasure craft.

Just a short distance up-river from Astoria above Tongue Point, gunkholers

can poke around in countless isolated anchorages. Their solitude may be interrupted only by the occasional calling of the bald eagle, blue heron, cormorant, scoter or grebe.

The steep and densely forested hills which gird the great river are breathtaking in their grandeur. Astoria, which is built on a precipitous hillside on the river's edge, shimmers by day in salt-scrubbed brilliance. At night, the reflection of the little town twinkles over the water.

There is no marina in Astoria which caters solely to the yachting community. Sailboats and motoryachts share quarters in the West Basin near the Astoria-Megler bridge with ocean trawlers and river gillnet boats. There is a fuel dock. Showers are available and moorage fees negligible.

Ashore, the Columbia River Maritime Museum in Astoria is a required stop for anyone remotely interested in nautical lore. Certainly among the finest maritime museums in the nation, this magnificent facility houses not only artifacts peculiar to Columbia River and Northwest maritime life, but also offers displays of much wider appeal. (See *Sea's* December article on maritime museums).

Moored just outside the museum is the idled lightship *Columbia*, which has been replaced in the ocean off the mouth of the river by a large automated sea buoy. Visitors are welcome aboard to see what life was like on one of America's last lightships.

Astoria is home to several good and affordable restaurants most of which feature local seafood such as salmon, oysters, dungeness crab and razor clams.

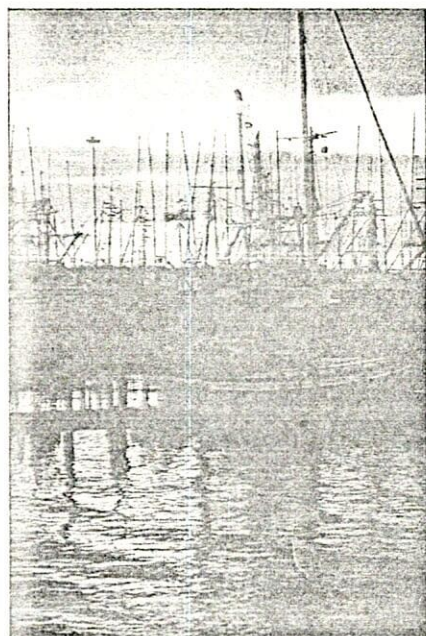
One restaurant in particular should not be missed. The Columbian Cafe is a tiny cafe run by an unreconstructed hippie with a penchant for the freshest fish. His homemade pasta is neither rolled nor cut until customers order it. The Columbian has the only espresso machine doing business in Astoria. The cappuccinos, cafe-au-laits and espressos are a delicious and eye-opening pause during an afternoon ashore. The dessert chef — who also doubles as the breakfast cook — belongs on every weight watcher's hit list. His French bread is coarse, yeasty and habit-forming. One caution: The Columbian keeps rather strange hours.

The Astoria Yacht Club is home to a small contingent of hardy racing sailors

willing to tackle the sometimes exhilarating conditions on the mouth of the Columbia. They sponsor a spring and late summer racing series and host the annual Six-Pac Race. This race formerly consisted of six races, two from Portland to Astoria, two in Astoria and two on the return trip to Portland. The event has been reorganized, the often tedious races up and down the river deleted in favor of five races in early August at Astoria.

The waters near Astoria provide a variety of fishing. Salmon is available offshore, as are tuna and several kinds of bottomfish, including snapper and lingcod. Sturgeon can be caught in the river.

Several beautiful parks are situated near Astoria. Fort Clatsop National Monument is on the site where the Lewis and Clark expedition wintered in



Astoria's waterfront at sunset belies the reputation of the sometimes treacherous Columbia Bar, where the Columbia River meets the Pacific Ocean.

1805. Fort Stevens is a vast expanse of rain forest and salt marsh that was a major coastal defense site until after World War II. Its huge gun batteries can be visited now and the entire park is crisscrossed by a series of paved bicycle and hiking paths. Fort Columbia on the Washington side of the river was also a coastal defense facility and has been left virtually intact, including officer and enlisted housing, gun batteries and other facilities. These and other parks and beaches in and near Astoria are ideal for picnics ashore, although transportation is necessary to visit most of these places.

There are several launching facilities in and around Astoria. Haul out facilities are also available. For pleasure boaters, the best of these is located across the river in Ilwaco, WA, at the Ilwaco Boatworks, which has both a large travel-lift and a marine railway — in addition to what may be the best rates on the coast.

Apart from these obvious attractions, there is little old Astoria itself, which has been called a museum without walls. Old Astoria is Victorian in architecture and mood — and there is very little of Astoria that is new. Walking tours of the town are organized during the summer months. Cassette tapes are available which describe the highlights of what one will see on the tour.

Certainly the focal point of Astoria's Victorian heritage is the Flavel House, a large, fully restored, Victorian mansion near the very heart of Astoria. It once was home to renowned mariner Capt. George Flavel, who monopolized and prospered in the Columbia River bar pilot business for many years.

While Astoria may not especially cater to the vacationing cruiser, as a working port it is well equipped to satisfy yachtsmen's needs. Certainly, one of its chief charms is that it is the quintessential small, working seaport without pretensions to quaintness. It is, therefore, authentically quaint.

The Challenge of Crossing the Columbia Bar

"Rough bar conditions" is the phrase used officially to describe the state of the Columbia River bar when the flow of the great river, and its strong ebb tide, meets the surge of the north Pacific Ocean. It is an understatement.

Capt. Martin West, a bar pilot in Astoria, OR, at the mouth of the Columbia, said, "On a max ebb coupled with a large incoming swell, you can encounter incredible waves. During the worst conditions — mind you, this isn't all the time — you can easily have 20 to 25 foot swells on the spring tide. (Spring tides occur every month of the year)." Swells up to 16 feet on a large ebb tide may break year-round. "Small boats are totally at the mercy of a breaking swell. You can take a break-

please turn to page 69

Astoria

continued from page 35

ing sea that is three or four feet, five feet will swamp you. Twenty feet will turn you end over end," West said. These are *rough bar conditions*.

Many great ships and small boats have been lost attempting the Columbia bar — it's also known as the graveyard of the Pacific. But countless thousands of others make the crossing every year and most crossings are thoroughly unremarkable. Amateur mariners, sport fishermen and sailors in small craft, account for a large percentage of those who traverse the bar regularly.

The trick is no trick at all. It is knowing when to go and when not to go.

Capt. West is an authority. His advice to small boat sailors is to attempt the bar only on the flood tide and only during daylight. One should begin the crossing, he said, one hour after low water on the bar. Ebb conditions continue for about one hour after predicted low water.

Local tide tables list predictions for Tongue Point several miles inside the bar, but include correction factors for several points on the river, including the bar. By coincidence, the tide prediction for Tongue Point falls just one hour later than the corrected prediction for the bar. So, following the Tongue Point prediction, the mariner will arrive on the bar one hour after low water.

Ebb tide should be avoided not only because of the possibility of meeting steep and breaking seas, but also because of strong currents. The ebb coupled with the river current often produces a seven-knot flow. Many sailboats which cannot make seven knots would travel backwards in such a current.

Even if rough bar conditions do not prevail and a boat is able to beat the current, it is still not wise to cross inbound on the ebb. If the ebb is running at five knots, for instance, and the boat transiting the bar (inbound) is running at six knots, the boat's net speed over the bottom is only one knot. At that rate, it will take approximately four hours to cross the area of greatest risk from buoy 2 to buoy 10. The same boat traveling at slack water or on the flood will cross the area in 48 or fewer minutes.

As for the captain's admonition to

Shoreside In & Around Astoria

Marine Facilities:

Port of Astoria, West Mooring Basin: Moorage, power, fuel, showers, waste pumpout; (503) 325-8279.

Port of Ilwaco, Ilwaco, WA: Moorage, power, fuel, haul out; (206) 642-3143.

Astoria Marine Construction, 403 S.W. Front: Service usually restricted to commercial fishing vessels, marine railways, hoist; (503) 325-4121.

Ilwaco Boat Works, Ilwaco, WA: Travel-lift, marine railway, boat yard, skilled labor, vessel layup; (206) 642-2712.

City of Warrenton, OR — Warrenton Mooring Basin: Moorage, power, fuel, showers; (503) 861-1821.

Warrenton Boat Yard, Warrenton, OR: Marine railway, skilled labor; (503) 861-1311.

Marine Supplies:

Astoria Marine Supply, Foot of 12th St., Astoria, (503) 325-2621 or 325-1938.

Englund Marine Supply, Foot of 15th St., Astoria, (503) 325-4341.

Jensen Communications, 2158 Exchange St., Astoria, (503) 325-5917.

Museums:

Clatsop County Historical Society, 1618 Exchange St., Astoria; (503) 325-2203.

Columbia River Maritime Museum, 1792 Marine Dr., Astoria; (503) 325-2323.

Flavel House, 441 8th St., Astoria; (503) 325-2563.

Special Events:

Scandinavian Midsummer Festival: Astoria, June 20-22.

Astoria Regatta: August 11-17.

cross only during daylight, his reasoning is more compelling than the obvious axiom that those without local knowledge should not sail about at night anywhere near an unfamiliar shore. West points out that there are at least six red-lighted range markers on the bar that are not on the chart. These are used by the dredges that maintain the channel. At night, says West, the uninformed mariner may confuse these lights with the lighted channel buoys.

The mariner approaching from sea is not able to judge bar conditions by observing them before he gets there, says West. He urges anyone preparing

to cross the bar to listen for the regularly updated bar report on Astoria weather radio, KEC-91 at 162.40 MHz (WX-2 on most VHF radios). West also advises anyone uncertain of what to expect on the bar to contact the Coast Guard via VHF at either Cape Disappointment or Astoria for advice regarding bar conditions.

West sees no reason not to come in the middle of the channel. He is quick to remind boaters, however, that they must obey the rules of the road and pass oncoming vessels to starboard.

The water is shallowest on the south side of the entrance and that is where the roughest water may be encountered. If one is going to favor one side, they should come up the north side.

The actual ship channel is a 600 foot wide corridor down the middle of the path marked by the red and green buoys. The distance from the edge of the main ship channel to the buoy line on each side is wider than the ship channel itself and has ample depth (30-40 feet) for all small craft. While the first-time visitor might feel best coming straight in the middle of the ship channel, he will avoid having to deal with large merchant ships by sailing the green-buoy line beyond the ship channel's northern border. Cruising buoy to buoy is also a reassuring practice.

It is certainly possible to cross the bar under sail. The often brisk wind at the mouth of the Columbia tends to come from the northwest in summer and the southwest in winter, making for a comfortable reach inbound across the bar. However, the chief object is to get across the bar. Therefore, the prudent sailor might choose to rely on his engine if the wind seems unreliable.

If a sailor feels incompetent to manage a crossing and cannot wait for conditions to improve, he can request the assistance of a pilot on VHF channels 13 or 16. Says West, "If I had a \$60,000 or \$150,000 yacht and I'm risking that plus my life, I'd call up the pilots and say 'send me a \$200 pilot and get me in here.'" Two hundred dollars is the minimum charge.

Finally, the Columbia bar deserves a very healthy respect, but not an unreasonable fear. It can be crossed by pleasureboaters almost every day from late May through September. Once having done it, you join the ranks of Columbia River Shellbacks. And sometimes, it is actually serene out there. ☺

— Paul Heist